

HIGH LINE OF MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

By Chin Siew Yin

The High Line is a disused Elevated Railway Track turned into a city park and pedestrian walk. It has become a popular tourist attraction.



On my recent trip to New York, a Malaysian American, Terence Low, insisted that I visit the Manhattan 'High Line,' knowing that heritage engineering works interest me. Terence explained that the High Line is an elevated pedestrian walkway cum garden cutting across busy downtown Manhattan. Taking the Metro subway line 7 from Elmhurst, we took off from the last station, Hudson Station 34 Street. Within a short walk, we were already at the Hudson waterfront, formerly the busy New York harbour. It is also the northern tip of the High Line, climbing gradually to about 10m above the ground, winding its way southwards into the city center.

It was a worthwhile trip, walking along the abandoned rail tracks while looking at the city from an elevated platform. Lining the High Line were information boards relating the history of the High Line. Reading the historical information to understand the transformation of this abandoned elevated rail track was equally interesting.

The 19th century brought a population boom and rapid growth in manufacturing to New York City. To serve the growing metropolis, freight rail lines were constructed along the city streets and waterfronts. The West Side of Manhattan was the country's busiest industrial waterfront. In 1847, the City of New York authorised street level

railroad tracks. By 1851, street level railroad traffic had caused so many accidents that the West Side's freight corridor became known as "Death Avenue". The New York Central Railroad hired men on horseback, called the West Side Cowboys, to ride in front of trains, waving pedestrians out of the way.

The high line was built by the New York Railroad between 1929 and 1934 to eliminate street level train crossing from 34th Street to Spring Street and to improve both efficiency and public safety.

For years the High Line served as an integral part of Manhattan's industrial landscape – the "life line of New York". The elevated railway allowed for efficient deliveries of meat, produce, and dairy products into the warehouses and factories up and down the West side. However, with the decline of manufacturing in Manhattan, train traffic in the 1950s and 1960s began to decrease on the High Line, and the elevated railway fell into a state of disuse.

In 1999, CSX Transportation, the national rail freight carrier and then-owner of the High Line, commissioned a planning study to assess the reuse of the 1.45 mile elevated railway. The study

was presented at a Community Board meeting in West Chelsea, inspiring two neighbourhood residents, Joshua David and Robert Hammond, to create Friends of the High Line, an organisation to advocate for the adaptive use of the High Line.

In 2005, following years of collaboration with the City of New York and 'Friends of the High Line', CSX donated the High Line (or High Line Park) to the City of New York, paving the way for it to be opened to the public. Led by the landscape architecture firm James Corner Field Operations, who drew inspiration from multiple disciplines including landscape architecture, urban design, and ecology, the abandoned spur was redesigned as a "living system". Since its opening in 2009, the High Line has become an icon of contemporary landscape architecture.

The park's attractions include naturalised plants, inspired by plants which grew on the disused tracks, and views of the city and the Hudson River. The pebble-dash concrete walkways swell and constrict, swing from side to side, and divide into concrete spines which meld into the hardscape with plants embedded in railroad-gravel mulch. "By opening the paving, we



Mid-section of the High Line with vertical access from the street. The space below the High Line is being used as a car park and for other



The High Line winding its way through the city's centre amidst apartment buildings.



View of the old High Line showing the moving train as displayed on the High Line walkway information board.



Northern end of the High Line revealing traces of rail lines.



The middle section of the High Line that crosses 10th Avenue is being turned into a viewing gallery with steps of seats for tourists to watch the busy traffic below. It is also used for stage performances or other cultural activities.

allow the plants to bleed through," said landscape architect James Corner, "almost as if the plants were colonising the paved areas. There's a sort of blending or bleeding or suturing between the hard paving, the surface for people to stroll on, and the plants." Stretches of track and ties hint at the High Line's former use, and portions of track are re-used for rolling lounges positioned for river views. The 120-species plant palette, curated by Dutch landscape architect Piet Oudolf, includes sturdy meadow plants (such as clump-forming grasses, liatris, and coneflowers), scattered stands of sumac and smokebush, and other non-native plants.

The West side of Manhattan has been transformed from an industrial district into residential and commercial neighbourhoods with new parks and cultural activities. The High Line is a physical reminder of the important role of the railroad in New York City's industrial past.

It is hailed as an urban renewal triumph and has since spawned a series of copycats such as The 606 in Chicago and The Goods Line in Sydney. ■